


ATTACK OF THE KILLER



BS!!!

Cheapo monsters. Bad acting.
Great posters. How the creature-
feature conquered Hollywood.

WORDS KIM NEWMAN



science-fiction was not a genre Hollywood took to easily. Examples from other countries weren't encouraging, for a start. Though now rated as classics, the German *Metropolis* (1926) and the British *Things To*

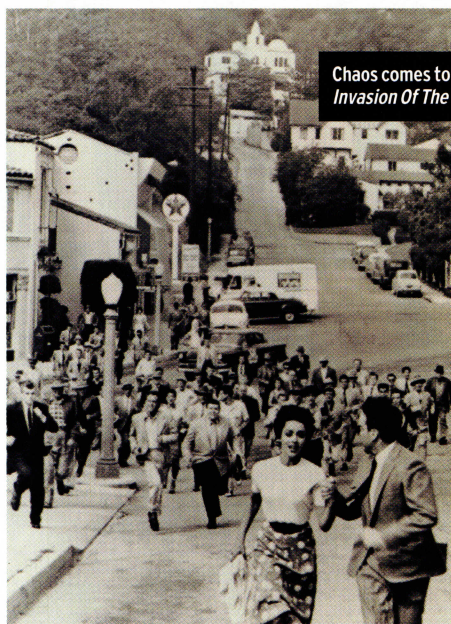
Come (1936) were both ruinously expensive, marginally commercial ventures. Serious sci-fi meant messy production histories, huge sums of money poured into innovative visual effects, and initially meagre returns.

Filmmakers may have been excited by scientific romance, but studio heads remained leery: in the 1930s and '40s, Sergei Eisenstein and Alfred Hitchcock all tried to set up Hollywood adaptations of H.G. Wells' *War Of The Worlds*, but didn't get anywhere. The shape of things to come was set in the early 1930s, when *Frankenstein* was a huge hit, but *Just Imagine* (a musical satire set in a *Metropolis*-style city of the future) died at the box office. For the next 20 years, s-f was eclipsed by horror and/or fantasy: any science-fiction films that did get made (such as Wells' *The Invisible Man*) looked like horror movies, with grotesque mad scientists, gothic laboratory sets and, most of all, monsters. The only exceptions were serials, such as *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers* and *Superman*. Adapted from comic books, these chapterplays were thought to be fit only for children.

The A-bomb created a firestorm of interest in weird science.

And that's how it remained, until Hiroshima.

The end of WWII performed two services for science-fiction as a genre. The first was to kill off the horror cycle: by comparison with news stories coming out of Europe and the Far East, *Dracula* seemed almost cuddly. A longer-lasting effect was that the A-bomb created a firestorm of interest in weird science. Unleashing "the power of the atom" was the sort of thing Boris Karloff



Chaos comes to town in 1956's *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*.



Previous Page: *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*
Above: *Invaders from Mars*
Below: *The Day The Earth Stood Still*.

had worked on in crackpot B-pictures, but it was actually done by pipe-smoking scientists working on a secret government base. The Manhattan Project earned a 1947 biopic, *The Beginning Or The End*, which now seems like the first proper American science-fiction film. The way it depicts genius boffins working together with gruff army types to solve a dangerous problem is exactly the template for many 1950s pictures in which clean-cut brainboxes and square-jawed soldiers toil round the clock, puzzling over how to defeat the flying saucer invaders.

In the late 1940s and early '50s, Americans started watching the skies. It wasn't just the Bomb, though news that Stalin had one began the freeze of the Cold War. Advances in jet aircraft and rocketry made headlines. People who in earlier times might have seen angels or fairies began reporting lights in the skies that became known as flying saucers. The very first American s-f film of the decade, released in January 1950, was called *The Flying Saucer* and takes the line, common before the linking in the popular mind of UFOs and ETs,

that the big disc is a prototype super-plane developed in secret by some earthly power.

S-f became viable in the 1950s thanks to two impulses. The more benign was a fascination with the growth of super-tech. '50s magazine adverts all but claim that the latest model refrigerator is atom-powered. After decades of Depression and war, America was affluent and excited about what the future held. The flying cars of the pulp magazines were expected to be rolling off the production line by 1958 at the latest. The downside was a deep-seated paranoia which found its first expression in Cold War-era McCarthyism. Nowadays, you couldn't trust your parents (*Invaders From Mars*), your neighbours (*Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*), your spouse (*I Married A Monster From Outer Space*) or your kids (*I Was A Teenage Werewolf*).



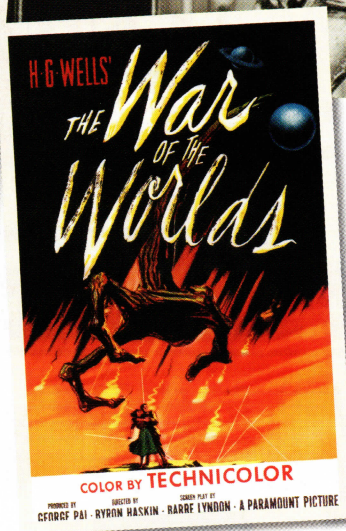
The two most influential s-f films of the '50s embodied these impulses: the wonders of science were hailed in 1950 by *Destination Moon*, while the dangers of the unknown menaced in 1951 in *The Thing From Another World*. Both movies were produced by maverick independents, George Pal and Howard Hawks, who had the muscle to get major studios to back them. It's perhaps a sad comment that the mostly optimistic *Destination Moon* holds up less well than the vividly nasty *The Thing*... It may also be that Hawks was just a better filmmaker than Pal. Having produced (but not directed) this big hit, Hawks made one more, very different s-f film (rejuvenation comedy *Monkey Business*) and went back to Westerns. Pal remained committed to the new genre, turning out, amongst other things, lavish adaptations of Wells' *The War Of The Worlds* and *The Time Machine*.

The B-pictures rushed into production to cash in on the publicity budgets of these hits made it to theatres first. Hearing that *Destination Moon* was in the works, producer Robert L. Lippert hurried up the schedule on *Rocketship X-M*. When Pal brought a lawsuit against the competing project, Lippert had the

script rewritten so that his moonshot went off course and the astronauts wound up on Mars to find a once-great civilisation destroyed by atomic war. Thus, by accident, the film kicked off another sub-genre, the Awful Atom Warning cycle, worrying about or depicting the consequences of nuclear attack. In 1951, another independent – producer Arch Oboler – elaborated on the theme in *Five*. A talky, pretentious film, *Five* offers ravaged cities and skeleton-strewn streets, but holds back on the bug-eyed mutants glimpsed in *Rocketship X-M*. They'd attack in force in later after-the-Bomb pictures such as *World Without End* and *The Day The World Ended*, and were in business as late as the *Planet Of The Apes* pictures of the '60s and '70s.

Anyone who doubts the influence of *The Thing...* on '50s science-fiction should look at *The Man From Planet X*. *The Thing...* mingles elements from old-fashioned horror, including shadowy corridors and a Karloff-shaped monster, with Hawksian professionalism, as military men and scientists,

jocks and docs, cope with a crisis in a high-tension but low-key manner influenced



Main pic: *This Island Earth*. Left: A selection of poster artwork from ground-breaking creature features.

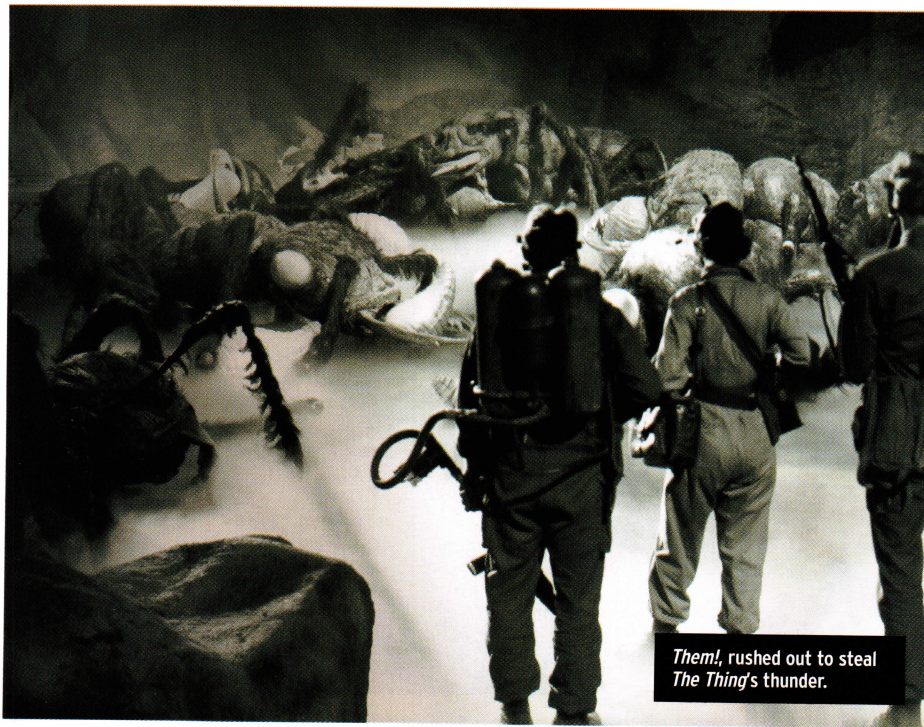
by the late 1940s run of "doco-style" cop movies. *The Man From Planet X*, a *Thing...* rip-off made by people who hadn't yet seen *The Thing...*, has a plexiglass-helmeted, big-domed dwarf with a raygun as an ambiguous menace, but is set in a castle on a Scots isle populated by the same torch-wielding peasants who had been persecuting the Frankenstein Monster for years. Ulmer changes the nature of the monster, but makes a Universal-look horror film; Hawks, and director Christian Nyby, make the alien monster reminiscent of familiar fiends, but take a new

approach to the creature-on-the-loose story. Almost all subsequent monster movies take something from *The Thing...*, whether it be the air of clipped military preparedness or the mannishly glam female lead with a male name (Nikki) who chips in a useful, if feminine, suggestion ("What do you do with a vegetable? You cook it").

In the first half of the 1950s, the studios made science-fiction films as big productions: *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, *The War Of The Worlds*, *This Island Earth*, *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*, *Forbidden Planet*. These films recognise kids as part of the audience and have elements (flying saucers, insect mutants, robots, big bangs) to please them, but they are films pitched at adults. *The Day The Earth Stood* and *Body Snatchers* are "message" movies about the dangers of paranoia and/or complacency, and all the other films pick up nuclear-age jitteriness (even the 19th-Century *20,000 Leagues* ends with a mushroom cloud). Only Disney felt the need for big stars such as Kirk Douglas and James Mason in their Jules Verne film. The other pictures let the colourful effects be the main attraction. Some of the best-remembered images from '50s s-f are in these pictures: the silver robot Gort halted by the command "Klaatu barada" »



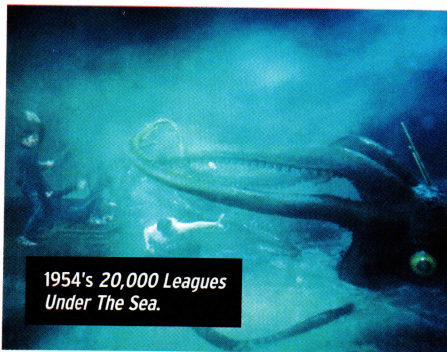
The Man From Planet X (1951).



Them!, rushed out to steal *The Thing's* thunder.

still-exciting little movies. Arnold's first s-f film was *It Came From Outer Space*, from a story by Ray Bradbury (who also had a hand in *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*), but he earned a place in the monster movie pantheon with *The Creature From The Black Lagoon*. A rare '50s fiend without an alien or atomic angle, the half-human/half-fish had enough personality to earn two sequels. Arnold also handled *Tarantula*, one of the best big-bug movies, and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, in which the spider stays regular size but a hero (Grant Williams) shrinks until he can be menaced by it. With its mix of satirical barbs and action-adventure, plus an unusually spiritual finish (our hero grows so small that he becomes at one with the universe), *The Incredible Shrinking Man* was the culmination of Arnold's science-fiction work.

Meanwhile, Hollywood was changing. Majors no longer had a stranglehold over distribution. Audience demographics altered, so that adults stayed home with television while teenagers flocked to theatres. Drive-ins flourished and were desperate for high-yield product. In this climate, there were opportunities to make and successfully distribute very cheap pictures, and the broad church of science fiction meant that a hit film didn't have to have big stars or production values, just a socko title and a lurid poster. The likes of *Red Planet Mars*, in which God speaks from Mars to overthrow Communism, or *Invasion USA*, in which an unnamed Communist nation launches an all-out attack on America (it's all a dream), tapped into anti-red and atom-dread



1954's *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*.

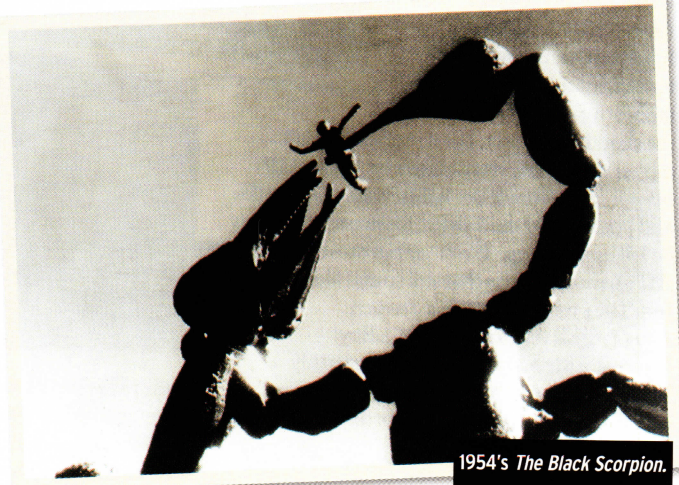
The Man From Planet X was simply a Plexiglas-helmeted, big-domed dwarf with a ray-gun.

nikto!", the submarine Nautilus and the giant squid, the pod-people and the raving hero ("they're taking over"), and Robby the Robot. Somehow, these movies didn't form a cycle and, after 1956, died out. The 'biggest' s-f films of the late '50s and early '60s weren't conceived or sold as such: the WWII drama *On The Beach* and the mind-stretching *The Manchurian Candidate*. Theatres did not double-bill these with *Teenage Cavemen* or *Creature With The Atom Brain*.

From the beginning, much of the action in s-f was in lower budgets or off the studio lot. Another influential hit was *King Kong*, which had a successful reissue in the early '50s. If rampaging monsters were needed, they obviously had to be up-to-the-minute radioactive rampaging monsters. Whole new cycles were kicked off by *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* and *Them!*, in which atomic bomb tests have the side-effects of unleashing a million-year-old dinosaur frozen in the Arctic ice or

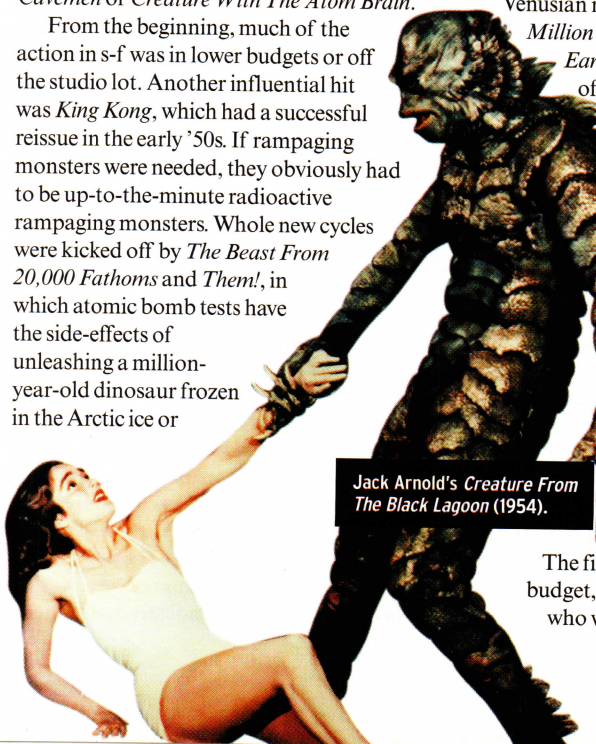
causing ants to grow to giant size. *Beast* was the first solo feature credit for Ray Harryhausen, the stop-motion animator who created many of the best beasts of the era – the octopus of *It Came From Beneath The Sea*, the alien invaders of *Earth Vs. The Flying Saucers*, the Venusian reptile of *20 Million Miles To Earth*. The success of *Beast* was noted in Japan, where Toho pictures launched an imitation that spawned its own still-flourishing cycle of atomic giant movies with the debut of *Gojira*, who became *Godzilla* for US release. *Them!* instituted a plague of often-comical big bugs: *The Deadly Mantis*, *The Black Scorpion*, *The Beginning Of the End* (grasshoppers), *The Monster From Green Hell* (wasps), *Earth Vs. The Spider*.

The first director to specialise in low-budget, high-quality s-f was Jack Arnold, who worked for Universal on a run of



1954's *The Black Scorpion*.

neuroses for a fast, profitable payoff. The kids were so hungry for monsters that they didn't even mind if effects weren't up to Ray Harryhausen's high standards. Penny-pinching producers tried to get away with the likes of *Phantom From Space*, in which the monster is invisible for 95% of the picture. This was the era of *Robot Monster*, an invader in a gorilla suit topped with an antennae-bristling space helmet, and *Cat-Women Of The Moon*, which discovers a lunar giant spider on a string and "the Hollywood cover girls" in black leotards and a lot of eye make-up. Even more "respectable" quickies such as *Invaders From Mars* offer bug-eyed stunt men in ratty velvet as their monsters and then try to keep them offscreen for as long as possible.



Jack Arnold's *Creature From The Black Lagoon* (1954).

The creature feature really took off with *Monster From The Ocean Floor*, an early effort from an ambitious young producer called Roger Corman. With as little as \$12,000, Corman made an hour-long film that took place entirely outdoors on a beach (ie: no sets) and saved its one-eyed undersea mutant for the last minute. Corman sold the film to American International Pictures, an outfit headed up by James H. Nicholson, who specialised in coining snappy titles such as *Hot Rod Girl* and then hiring producers to make films to fit, and Samuel Z. Arkoff, who smoked mogul-sized cigars and cut the deals. AIP were among the first outfits in Hollywood to see how things had changed since the great days: the old audience were now at home watching the box, while the theatres were full of kids who wanted monsters from space and/or chicks in tight sweaters.

Among AIP's innovations was the abolition of the B-picture. Other Poverty Row producers turned out bottom-of-the-bill fodder, but the lion's share of box office went to the major who handled the main attraction. AIP issued double bills and reaped all the coin from combos such as *Day The World Ended/Phantom From 10,000 Leagues*. It helped that Corman turned out to be an inventive, innovative director even on the shoddiest project, but it probably didn't matter that much, since quite a lot of the AIP output came from lesser lights. Nicholson's titles and posters sold the movies: his masterpiece may be *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* but most AIPs have come-ons that still sound like fun. The poster for *I Was A Teenage Frankenstein* shrieks "Body of a Boy! Mind of a Monster! Soul of an Unearthly Thing!" while *Earth Vs. The Spider* promises "50 Tons of Creeping Black Horror! It Must Eat You to Live!"

The broad church of science-fiction meant a hit film didn't have to have anything except a socko title and a lurid poster.

Sometimes, AIP's pre-selling of lurid properties rebounded. When exhibitors who had paid upfront for *The Beast With A Million Eyes* saw the film and discovered that its title was a metaphor for an invisible alien who could possess animals and thus had theoretical access



Main pic: *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957): not a cat lover. Below left: the poster for 1955 hit *Tarantula!*



The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms checks out the world above water.

to the million eyes, they revolted. AIP insisted Corman hire Paul Blaisdell to insert an actual multi-eyed monster, though the pip-squeak saucer pilot fell short of the full million by well over 990,000 eyes. Blaisdell, an enthusiastic sculptor in foam-rubber who insisted on wearing his own monster suits, became an AIP mainstay, creating wonderfully strange, if rarely convincing, grotesques for *The Day The World Ended*, *The She Creature* and others. His finest hour may be Corman's *It Conquered The World*, in which a Venusian lurks in a cave and conquers if not the world, then a slice of California populated by the likes of Peter Graves and Lee Van Cleef. Corman, an engineering graduate, gave Blaisdell instructions to make the monster, "according to scientific principles... to function on a planet with heavy gravity, lifeforms would have to be very massive and low to the ground." When "It" was brought on set, actress Beverly Garland looked at the fanged turnip thing and said, "So you've come to conquer the world, take

that!" When Garland kicked his creature across the cave, Corman revised his scientific understanding to formulate a new law of movie physics that, "The monster must always be bigger than the leading lady!"

Corman was too prolific to limit himself to making movies for AIP, and turned out some of his most memorable s-f quickies (*Attack Of The Crab Monsters*, *Not Of This Earth*) for competing set-ups such as Allied Artists, who'd hit big with *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, a film that realised alien invaders who look exactly like regular people are a) deeply disturbing, and b) very cheap. Soon, screens were awash with bizarre efforts from farther afield: *Godzilla* and *Rodan* came from Japan, while British science-fiction films varied in respectability from Hammer's exciting *Quatermass* movies to the lurid likes of *Devil Girl From Mars* and *Fiend Without A Face*.

Away from Hollywood, gangs of investors got together to self-finance monster movies.



Ed Wood's stunningly bad *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959).

Roger Corman formulated a law: "The monster must always be bigger than the leading lady!"

The biggest hit of this trend was the somehow-archetypal *The Blob*, remembered for Steve McQueen as a thirtyish teenage hero and one of the most pleasing monsters (a pile of red jelly that eats people). This was put together by people who specialised in religious films and thought it'd be an idea to do something commercial to finance their evangelical efforts. A similar source of funding became available to Ed Wood when stitching together footage of the late Bela Lugosi and an alien invasion plot to create the lasting miracle that is *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, a film which still seems to have been made in a parallel dimension. And for every *Plan 9* and *Blob* still getting cult playdates, there are stacks of homemade efforts such as *The Hideous Sun Demon* awaiting rediscovery.

Eventually, things changed.

A new teen appeal genre was created in the mid-'50s in the wake of *Rock Around The Clock* and *Rebel Without A Cause*—pictures about drag-racing juveniles or rock-happy musicians. Late '50s movies tried to combine the trends, as in the various teenage editions of classic monsters or the wonderfully-titled but otherwise-forgettable *Ghost Of Dragstrip Hollow*. This gave rise to wonderful moments such as the giant arachnid brought to life by a rehearsing high school rock combo in *Earth Vs. The Spider* or the bug-eyed monsters who defeat the army but are wiped out by hot-rod headlights in *Invasion Of The Saucer Men*.

In the early part of the decade, the science-fiction hero was an adult monster fighter backed by the government; after Elvis and James Dean, he was a teenager who had to deal with the bigoted sheriff or his girlfriend's disapproving

parents before he could tackle the mutant invader. The success of the *Quatermass* films prompted Hammer to alter the recipe and embark on a series of old-style gothic horror films with new-fangled colour and sex/violence, which in turn led Corman to abandon wasp women and teenage cavemen for Vincent Price and Edgar Allan Poe

Steve McQueen finds jelly can be very scary in 1958's *The Blob*.



adaptations. 1950s-style monsters straggled into the '60s, in cheaper and cheaper, more marginal efforts such as *Destination Inner Space*



The original poster for MGM's *Forbidden Planet*.

and *Voyage To The Planet Of Prehistoric Women*. But the world moved on.

The keepers of the flame were 20th Century-Fox. Having had a 1958 hit with *The Fly*, they quietly kept in the genre over the years, backing a big movie almost annually: *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth*, *Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea*, *Planet Of The Apes*, *Fantastic Voyage*. The tradition ticked over until it paid off hugely with *Star Wars* in 1977, and has remained in force till today, yielding franchises such as the *Alien* saga and hits such as *Independence Day*. George Lucas was among the first of a wave of 1950s kids to hit the movies in the 1970s, with tattered collections of *Famous Monsters* magazine and dusty Robby The Robot toys in their attics, intent on recreating on a huge scale

the sort of fun they had at drive-ins or kiddie matinees. John Landis (*Schlock*), Joe Dante (*Matinee*) and Tim Burton (*Ed Wood*) have all made films which are love letters to the monsters of their past and the inventive, cash-starved filmmakers who knocked 'em out.

Since the '70s, almost all the major '50s s-f hits have been remade or reworked: *Body Snatchers*, *Invaders From Mars*, *The Blob*, *Godzilla*... even *Attack Of The 50-ft Woman*, *The Little Shop Of Horrors* and *Teenage Cavemen*. A few of these films, such as John Carpenter's *The Thing* are reinterpretations as much as homages, and apply the metaphors of the old movies to new times, also upping the ante in effects as the heirs to Harryhausen got to lay down the rubber again. Even those who haven't actually remade their favourite films have tried to recapture the feel; Lucas, unusually, harks back to the *Flash Gordon* serials of the '30s, but Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters*, *E.T.* and *Jurassic Park* are very much the children of *It Came From Outer Space*, *The Man From Planet X* and *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*.

Technophilia and paranoia, which took root in the '50s and powered the first great s-f cycle, remain current in the American imagination, and are especially at home in the film industry. As long as that's so, the great '50s drive-in creatures will never lie down, and audiences should always keep watching the skies...